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OFF THE GRAVE

WILLIAM F. HALSALL

MR. HALSALL'S MARINE PAINTINGS

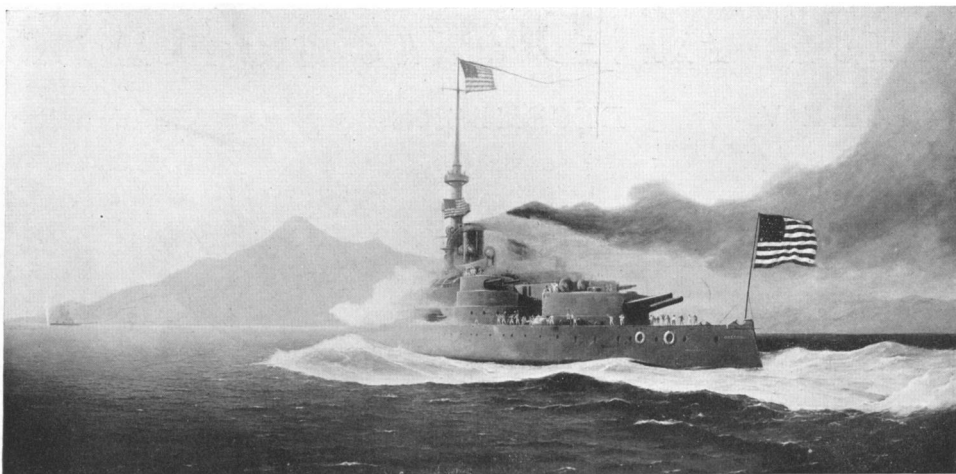
BY WILLIAM HOWE DOWNES

THERE is no phase of sea scenery, no aspect of ships or boats, unfamiliar to William F. Halsall, the marine painter, who has been a sailor before the mast, and is never so perfectly at home as when off soundings. Born at Kirkdale, England, in 1841, near the mouth of the Mersey, his love of the ocean was born and fostered in his earliest years. He went to sea when he was only twelve years old, and followed the life of the sailor for seven years. His first voyage was as cabin-boy on the ship *Ocean Rover*, from Portsmouth for East Indian ports; subsequently he made voyages to Australia and to the African coast, as well as to various parts of Europe; and at the age of sixteen he became second mate.

A short time before the outbreak of the Civil War he had come to Boston

and had gone into business as a fresco painter; but he immediately enlisted in the navy, and served two years in the North Carolina blockading squadron. After that he resumed his work in Boston, painting signs, and studying evenings at the Lowell Institute school of design. He began to paint portraits of yachts and other vessels for the proud owners; and this occupation, with his natural taste for everything that smacked of the salt water, sufficed to fix the character of his future efforts. It was his manifest destiny to become a marine painter.

He has now been painting the sea during a successful professional career extending over some fifty years, and he looks as if he might keep it up for another quarter of a century, for at seventy-two he is a surprisingly young looking



BATTLESHIP OREGON

WILLIAM F. HALSALL

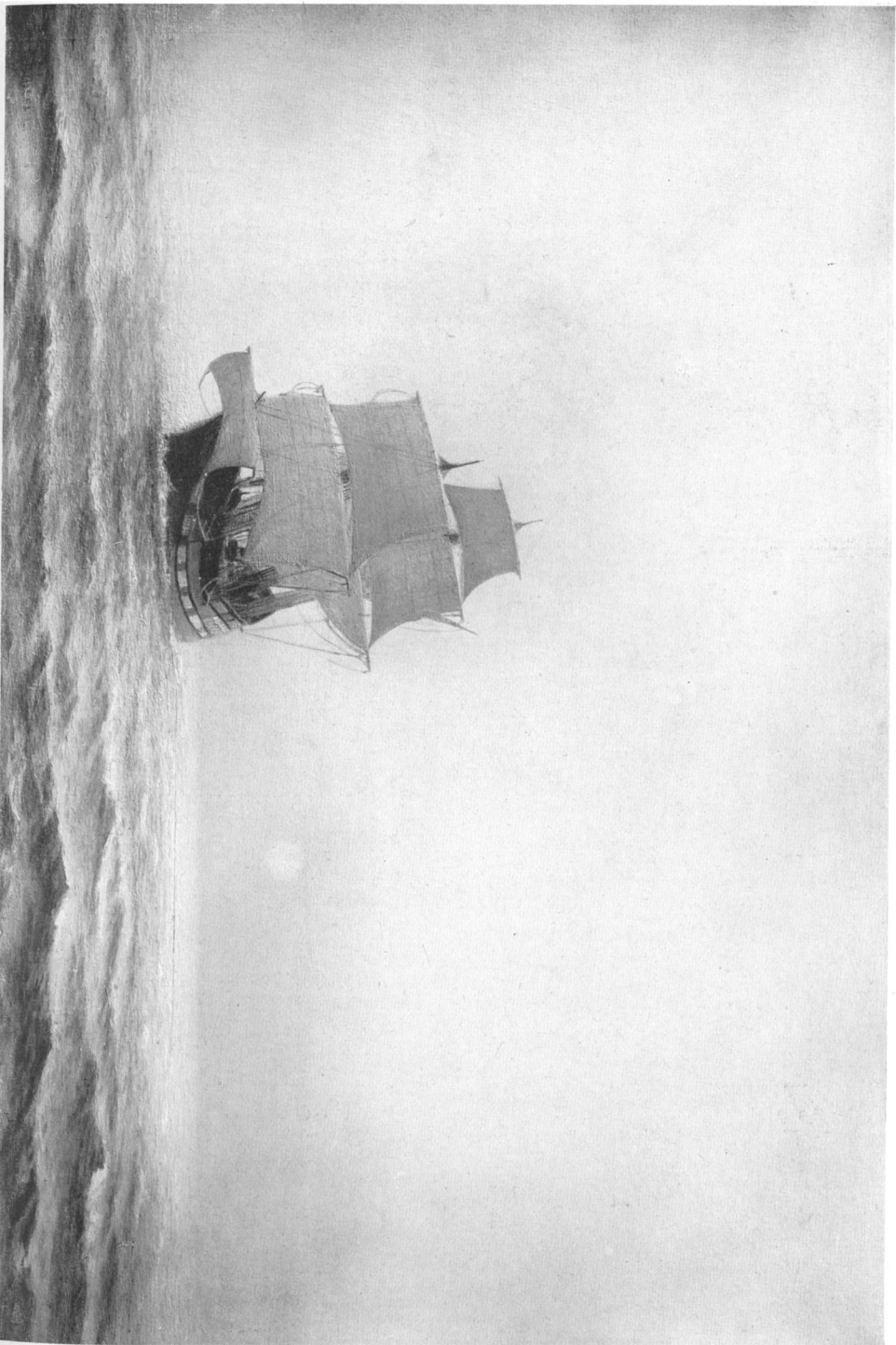
and young feeling man. For the past three years he has been living in Provincetown, Massachusetts, in close touch with his beloved motive. There he occupies a remarkably large studio, about sixty feet long—the upper story of a disused shirt factory, with an excellent light. No need to tell any one who knows Provincetown that it is an ideal headquarters for a marine painter. The harbor is always full of fishing vessels, and usually of naval craft of all types, and it is a community thoroughly saturated with maritime traditions.

The most important picture ever produced by Mr. Halsall is his large historical canvas representing the battleship *Oregon* in pursuit of the Spanish cruiser *Cristobal Colon* during the famous naval engagement off Santiago de Cuba in 1898. He has been engaged intermittently on this composition for several years, and it will undoubtedly constitute not only an authentic historical page in the naval history of the United States, but a remarkably spirited and stirring picture of a modern sea fight. No episode of the Spanish War of 1898 so vividly appealed to the patriotic imagination of the American people as the hurried voyage of the *Oregon* from the Pacific to the Atlantic, around Cape Horn, to join our fleet in the West Indies; and when to this unprecedented feat of navigation was added the arrival

of the staunch battleship in the nick of time to take an important part in the destruction of the Spanish fleet, the thrill that was imparted to all who watched events in those dramatic days must be remembered as the crowning experience of a battle summer.

The particular episode chosen for delineation by the artist shows the *Oregon* in furious pursuit of the fleeing *Cristobal Colon*, a few miles to the westward of the harbor entrance of Santiago. The canvas is ten feet high and twenty feet wide. The *Oregon* is in the foreground, slightly to the right of the center of the composition. She is under forced draft, the smoke pouring in a dense cloud from her funnels, and the powerful fabric trembling under the strenuous propulsion of her engines as she plunges forward, churning the deep blue Caribbean waters into a wonderful seething wake of emerald and silver. The rush of the battleship is felt with an extraordinary sense of actuality. The heavy guns in the forward turret are being fired, as the Spanish cruiser, afar at the left, strikes her colors, and turns in desperation to lay her bones on the Cuban beach. A shell from the *Oregon* has just struck the water under the bow of the Spanish vessel, throwing a great column of spray high in the air. The background shows the mountainous shore of the south coast of Cuba, soft-

THE MAYFLOWER, FIRST MORNING AT SEA



WILLIAM F. HAYSALL



TOO ROUGH TO FISH

WILLIAM F. HALSALL

ened by miles of intervening atmosphere. It is a very dramatic and stirring picture. To collect his data, Mr. Halsall went to Cuba, armed with letters to the officers of the *Oregon* from Hon. John D. Long, former Secretary of the Navy. He studied the *Oregon*, conversed with officers and crew, made a thorough examination of the coast, the mountains, the sea, and all the surroundings. During the progress of the painting, he received constant and invaluable criticism and counsel from high naval officers, including the commander of the *Oregon*, and from naval architects and designers. As an historical document his picture is absolutely to be relied upon as trustworthy.

Mr. Halsall had already made a venture in the field of historical painting when he produced his "First Fight of Ironclads" (that between the *Monitor* and the *Merrimac*), a large canvas which was bought by Congress in 1886. The greatly superior pictorial qualities of the later painting mark the progress

made by the artist in the intervening period of twenty-seven years. The hopeless ugliness of the *Merrimac* and the *Monitor* were insurmountable obstacles to the successful artistic treatment of the earlier theme.

The kind of things that Mr. Halsall thoroughly enjoys doing are such subjects as his "Too Rough to Fish," "Running Free," "Haul Out to Windward," "Off the Grave," "Cape Cod," "Easterly Weather," and "A Squall," marine pieces in which the weather, wind, waves, and state of the atmosphere are pungently contrasted with the navigating of various sorts of craft under sail. His best pictures are naturally these open-sea effects, where the skill and science of the sailor are pitted against the elements, and we witness the contest, always so interesting, between the pigmy, man, and the giant, ocean. Such works appeal to the imagination and to the universal love of a struggle and a combat. In his drawing of waves and ships Mr. Halsall is very strong.

A good example is the picture entitled "Too Rough to Fish," in which two Gloucester schooners, under shortened sail, are riding out a gale in company, the action of the vessels in the foreground being very interestingly depicted. In "Running Free" we have a most spirited delineation of a full-rigged ship and a small schooner coming towards us in a smother of foam before a favoring wind. "Haul Out to Windward" is an unusual composition of sailors aloft, upon a yard, their figures relieved against a lively sea which stretches out to a smoky horizon. The transparent tints of the blue and blue-green waters in this picture are very handsome. The atmosphere, as in all

Mr. Halsall's marine pieces, is essentially that of the Atlantic.

As a contrast to the foregoing works, the historical painting of "The Mayflower: First Morning at Sea," which is in the Pilgrim Memorial Hall at Plymouth, Massachusetts, offers a large and tranquil vision of the ocean sparkling under the warm rays of the just-risen sun, with the brave little craft setting forth on her long voyage over unknown waters to an unknown port. In this veracious page of history there is an interesting and impressive expression of the vast spaces of the ocean solitudes, set against the diminutive dimensions of the vessel in which the Pilgrim Fathers made their great adventure.



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